

CORA CABAUG PYLES

Thanks Lou Reed

“He looks like Bruce Lee,” Heather’s friend Mike had told her. She scanned her cul-de-sac, the stark faces of the track homes browbeaten by the Southern California summer sun; models one to five, each sister house hunching three feet away from the other, grimacing at the marked differences—a banzai tree, showoff roses, rock bed borders— in the other’s front yard. Would anyone inside notice Ricky walking up? She colored in a hunky Chinese man in a helmet hair cut sauntering down her street, arms swinging in time with buoyant legs, ready to spring and round kick ninjas leaping from the trashcans.

“I’m grounded,” she’d told Ricky on the phone an hour ago. “But my mom will be gone for about an hour. Better come right now or don’t come at all.”

“Yeah, dude. Seeya in a few,” Ricky said.

Heather had never bought pot before. She didn’t know Ricky. But Mike said he was okay. Maybe she’d like him.

“It’s cool he delivers,” she had said to Mike. “But why would he come to my house? He doesn’t *know* me.”

“I dunno,” Mike said. She had heard him exhale smoke and chuckle, pictured his tan, jock-handsome face. Heather hoped Mike had not said anything weird to Ricky.

Instead, she let herself think that maybe Ricky saw her at school and thought she was cool or pretty. *Pretty gets you things*, Heather thought. And she did think she was pretty, sometimes, when she made up her eyes to smoldering and used contouring blush to slim down her plump cheeks, donned black clothes and drank two-dollar Boone’s Farm

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wine, then, she felt pretty. But other times she felt pretty ugly, such as after eating a pint of ice cream and then taking a nap, waking up to feel the pool of fatty slop still in her stomach, or when she couldn't find a thing to wear that would be approved by the other new wave, punk rock outcasts at school. Maybe *he* thought she was pretty, she had lost a few pounds this summer. She felt okay. So it was cool he was coming to her house. What better thing to do when you're grounded than to get high in the safety of your room, not worrying if you're pretty enough for anything?

She smoked a stray roach and waited.

"Shit. Where is he?" She broke from the window and crouched to turn up the boombox on the floor, then jumped back on the stage: the space between her bed and mirror. Reaching up with open palms toward her popcorn ceiling in gospel praise, her head nodding with the song's rhythm, she joined Lou Reed in a duet: "Baby be good, do what you should, you know it will work alright."

Lou Reed, on the cover of the cassette—*The Velvet Underground/ Velvet Underground*, 1969— wore shagged hair, t-shirt, jeans, shades, all black over wall-pale skin. His image somersaulted behind her eyelids against a background of white light, the color of a meditative "yes." Although the album was released two years before she was born, and it was now 1987, the song's lyrics struck brilliantly like a new-found cure. Electricity. She swallowed the words, round and meaty, tasting their possibilities.

Sweating now, Heather flopped onto the bed and chiseled the ceiling with her eyes; carved an image of herself and Bruce Lee on her bed discussing Lou Reed. Bruce Lee's marble hand that could chop bricks props up his head, his elbow on her purple pillow. He looks up at Heather, sitting with her back against the wall, rolling a perfectly tight joint against the Cliff Notes' "Emerson and Thoreau on Transcendentalism" on her lap.

"It was about love then, in the 60's, you know?" Heather on the ceiling said, "The kind of love that was free, that set you free, that didn't tie you down or make you sit by the stupid phone waiting for it to ring...it wasn't about commitments...it was about loving life and diggin' on each other."

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Ceiling Heather zipped a cherry-colored lighter, dragged on the joint, gracefully, without screwing up her face.

“Now in the eighties it’s about power; sex is something you want and take and try to get more of than the next person, like money, you know? Sex is something that’s used to hurt, because it’s not about love anymore.”

“Whoa, you’re right, Heth,” Bruce on the ceiling said, “I never thought of it that way.”

“Yeah, me neither. Really. Until I listened to Lou Reed. But what do I know? I’ve never been in love before. Maybe puppy love in the seventh grade.”

“Yeah, puppy love,” Bruce smiled. Heather passed him the joint; he sucked. She imagined her words were as promising as those throat-burning leaves. The real Heather was going to be a high school senior in the fall—less than a year to be deemed profound.

“That was different. Innocent,” ceiling Heather continued, “I didn’t even want sex then. Puppies don’t want sex, do they, Bruce?”

“No. Don’t think so Heth.”

The ceiling Heather gazed at him and let the good vibes stir in silence. The pause, in Heather’s moving images, was the best part.

“But like Thoreau says, we only know what we experience. So I need to *experience* before I really *know* any of this stuff.”

“How can one be so smart, young and sexy at the same time?” ceiling Bruce said. He lifted himself off his elbow and reached for her; the muscles in his arms pushed and rolled under tanned skin like a tiny throbbing mountain range.

The real Heather clung to Bruce’s words as she put her hand under her shirt and squeezed her breast. The other hand slithered down to her thigh. She opened her legs and felt the hard ligament that bridged her thigh and pubis. “Touch me,” Heather said as she caressed the smooth skin and tugged on a crinkled hair. She opened her hand, wide as a man’s. “Oh Bruce, fuck me in two,” she said, as her fingers moved under warm pink cotton.

The rumble of a car rolling up the driveway made Heather

yank her hand away and jump back to the window. Below her the tan Ford Tempo crept halfway up the driveway, stopped, lurched, stopped, lurched, then quit four feet from the garage door. Mom.

Up the street, Heather noticed the small figure, a boy, sauntering towards the house. He stopped mid-step and awkwardly pulled out a cigarette from a bulge in his front jeans pocket. Ricky.

She darted down the stairs and in five seconds was on the driveway where she spied her mother behind the wheel, the car door open, digging in her purse, pursuing what Heather guessed was a receipt, an Activan sedative, or a bite size Snickers.

“Let me open the trunk for you Mom,” Heather said. Her mother had trouble opening the trunk. She held a degree and had taught banking in the Philippines, was now a realtor, but for some reason didn’t drive the freeways, couldn’t pump her own gas, and always had trouble opening the trunk.

“It doesn’t open when I do it,” her mother said, as always. She started to smile but then her lips clamped shut. Heather read her mother’s wary gaze and looked down at her skirt as if remembering a fresh stain that needed washing.

Heather brought in the groceries for her mother. Standing in the mouth of the refrigerator, Heather settled an egg into its cradle. “Jennifer is having a party,” Heather said, holding the empty egg container. Her mother blocked the garbage can as she poured a ten-pound bag of rice in a yellow Tupperware cylinder. Heather couldn’t ask her to move, not yet. “The party’s this Saturday.”

Her mother twisted the empty canvas rice bag like a wet rag and evaluated Heather through her drug store version Ray-Bans. Heather wore a red sixty’s style sleeveless top and denim skirt that seemed to not be cinching her waist as usual. Her hair was neat, brushed, Aqua-net hairspray-free. Heather knew her mother approved.

“Heather, you’re grounded,” her mother said.

“But its *Jennifer’s* party,” Heather clarified. Jennifer,

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Heather's best friend, was not at the Guns'n'Roses concert last Saturday; she did not come home drunk at 5 a.m.; and Jennifer, did not get slapped as she walked through the front door, by her mother.

Heather's mother dropped the rice bag in the trashcan and shook her head. "Fine. Dad and I are going to Aunt Lisa's for mahjong that night. You better not come home late."

"Thanks, Mom." Heather hugged her.

She went out to the car to get the grocery bag that, as she told her mother, she forgot to bring in. Ricky hovered across the street like an undecided fly. He was just a year under her but looked more like a grade-schooler who should be riding a BMX bike on the tennis courts, not a pot peddler. His lollipop head over his runt figure nodded towards her. She cringed at the thought of her fabricated ceiling scenario minutes earlier, then waved Ricky over.

Heather expected he'd be pissed, having to wait, but the plastered grin below his glassy eyes suggested otherwise. "Dude, your mom's home. Whatta we do?" Ricky said. Heather scrutinized the chunks of his thick black straight hair pointing in all directions as she pondered her next move. A romantic interlude could not be possible, but the ghost of the ceiling Heather haunted her, yearned to play itself out. To Speak. To Dazzle.

She brought Little Ricky to the kitchen where her mother was washing rice. Heather figured since he was Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, an Asian kid with tadpole eyes, he was non-suspect. She decided Ricky was Chinese, like Bruce Lee.

"Mom, this is Ricky. Is it okay if I take him up to see my wall?"

"Hi Ricky, nice to meet you." Heather's mother said, in her Miss Provincial Princess voice, the same voice she used to greet other moms and dads at the community pool when Heather was younger, or Heather's father's work friends at banquets and company picnics. Heather's mom was always polite.

Heather tilted her chin up and straightened her back as she

led Ricky up the stairs to her bedroom.

“I’ve kept it minimal,” Heather said, entering the room that was furnished with a mattress, floor lamp and large wall mirror. The wall behind the mattress was papered from ceiling to floor with aluminum foil.

“Cool foil.” Little Ricky said. He tossed a sandwich bag of tiny, dusty leaves onto the bed; the sweet earthy smell blotted the room. He stepped to the wall and pressed his nose onto his wrinkled reflection. “Whoa.”

“Andy Warhol had it all over his studio, called The Factory. Mick Jagger, Lou Reed, all the *in* artists and celebrities in New York hung out there,” Heather said.

“Oh. Don’t know any of those dudes,” he said.

Heather swallowed disappointment, again. This Ricky is a step back, she thought.

“You’ve gotta go. I’m grounded,” Heather said, and opened her bedroom door.

“Your mom said it was okay,” Ricky said.

“If you’re here longer than ten minutes she’ll check up.” She cocked her head.

“Hey Mike said you like to party,” he whined.

Heather felt a second pang of Mike’s possible betrayal.

“Would you shut up, my mom’s probably listening by the stairs.”

“She can’t hear anything.”

Heather waved her hand then put a finger to her lips. “She’s coming up.”

The creak of footsteps ascending the stairs was audible to both of them. Heather stood behind the doorframe and peeked into the hallway.

“Close the door!” Ricky whispered.

Heather ignored him, waiting for her mother’s steps to come.

“The shit’s on the bed, close the door!”

Ricky lunged and pushed the door closed, nearly slamming it on Heather’s fingers. She pulled her hand away and held it

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in front of her chest. “You okay?” Ricky said. He reached as if to grab her hand but missed. His palm wiped over her nipple.

“What are you doing?” Heather said, backing away. Anger swept across Ricky’s face.

“We could’ve done this by the golf course, why’d you bring me up here?”

Heather swayed as the heat, hunger and confusion crashed down on her.

“I don’t know. I thought...” She stopped to listen once more for her mother’s steps, but heard nothing. “Can you just go, please?”

Ricky stared for a moment then grinned. His head shook, making the clumps of his hair bob. “Yeah, it’s cool. Whatever. See you around at school.” He opened the door.

“Hey, what are you going to tell Mike?” Heather asked.

Ricky’s eyes disappeared as he grimaced. “Fuckin’ Mike? He’s trippin’ dude, I don’t know why he’s saying all this shit about you.”

“Yeah, really,” Heather said, and shrugged like it was no big deal.

“Wait. I’ll walk down with you, I guess,” Heather called after him.

Down the stairs, Heather heard her mother’s voice speaking in Tagalog on the phone, in the dining room adjacent to the kitchen. The unknown syllables rang in a gossipy tone. Heather heard no pause in her mother’s chatter until Ricky opened the front door.

“Heather, are you leaving?” her mother’s voice said.

“No mom, just Ricky.”

Her mother’s voice said “wait a second” to the phone.

Ricky turned his head towards the dining room and lifted his small chin. Heather followed his gaze on the dining room area where only an end arm chair was visible. Heather quickly visualized the next scene: her mother poised at the other end,

still as statue, before resting the phone to get up. She'd walk the five feet of copper plush carpet, then pop her soft, pretty face around the wall's corner. She'd ask Heather, sweet but suspicious, about the smell upstairs. Heather would say, most casually, that she was burning incense in her room—again. There'd be a tense second, perhaps fear in Ricky, but Heather knew somehow she'd get through it unscathed. It would be, actually, the perfect scenario to demonstrate her cool and quick cleverness, her flair for deception; and with Ricky as a witness, be parlayed into an anecdote spread around school, or at least, her circle, to boost her reputation. Make up for Ricky being so boyish, so wrong. Redeem the whole lame day.

Or maybe it would be different. Her mother, concerned, would say “what are you doing, Heather?” in a way that would give Heather no choice but confession: Yes, mom, it's what you think it is. The stuff that smells like incense? I've smoked it before... had a stash in my room all week but ran out...so I called Ricky. And you were here the whole time. And it's so easy, like ditching school, and kissing boys, and letting them touch me, and wanting to do more if I wasn't so scared...and going to clubs and parties with alcohol and saying I'm sleeping over at a friend's but not coming to a home at all. Ricky is high right now, can't you tell? And we almost had sex...he could've raped me up there in my room but you'd never know...You think boys come up to see my wall—that's it—and I don't know if that's cool of you or if you just don't care...and I don't know if that's good or bad, wrong or right, because Lou Reed says that both those words are dead...and that's more sense than anything I've heard from you— ever.

Her mother wouldn't yell or scream. No. But her hand would raise and slice the air beside her right ear; with perfect teeth clinched and eyes glaring beyond Heather, perhaps at some dream kicking the dirt past her, she'd say, “This. Is. Not. For. Me.”

There'd be silence after that, as always. Heather would bow her head and collect another sigh from her mother before watching her disappear.

Heather could then grin and shrug at Ricky—like, no big deal—but anticipate, even enjoy, a brief and subtle change—like the weather— clear skies after the rain, before the smog rolls back all over them.

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“Bye Ricky,” Heather’s mom called out.

Ricky’s body jerked slightly. “Bye, um, Heather’s mom.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets, kept his eyes on the chair. His expectant grin, the same one Heather caught earlier on the street, trembled and waited.

Her own lips quivered as she attempted to bring her mouth corners up.

“Um, she’s not coming,” Heather said, in a weak sardonic puff.

“Yeah, whatever.” He screwed up his face in an expression that Heather couldn’t read, but it poked her insides and made her sorry she spoke the way she did. She let off a nervous laugh and stepped outside the door for him to follow. Ricky was just a kid, Heather thought, and Asian, like her. Just trying to be cool, fit in, fit out, like her. Maybe they shared more than their age and coloring, and maybe she should be smart enough to sense some connection.

Heather looked again at Ricky’s big face and shook away these notions. She smiled when he said “Seeya” then groaned, closing the door behind him. For now, she didn’t want to wonder about her and Ricky’s similarities or sameness. She didn’t want to be the same as him, or anybody, really. For now she needed to be unique, original, and passionate about a purpose or idea that would set her apart from Ricky, her lump of friends, from everybody. Only one thing seemed to offer a glimpse of this—Lou Reed.

Relieved to be in her room again, alone, she watched Ricky’s small figure going up the street, stopping to take a toke, like a fly crawling on a light bulb, oblivious to the sick glow.

She hid the pot under her mattress and circled the room, trying to out pace the guilt—or was it shame?—rushing inside. She craved a double-scoop of Thrifty’s Rocky Road, but her objective to fast away a few more millimeters forced her to nosh, instead, on a vision of the upcoming party: friends, chips, sandwiches, beer, wine, rum—her tantalizingly

trim image introducing Lou Reed. She would tell her friends that there was something in his music, the words, that was building a country inside her; and when she's asked, again, where she's from— whether she is Chinese, Japanese, Samoan or Filipino— “The Velvet Underground” is what Heather could say. Yes, she could talk about these things to her *real* friends. They were cool. They would get me, Heather imagined. And like her mom, she would not come empty-handed. She had a sandwich bag of pot to bring.

